

NEWS

For immediate release



MARICOPA COUNTY
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County Cracks Down on Illegal Caterers

Maricopa County Environmental Services Department has discovered more than 80 catering businesses that may be putting the public at risk by operating without required permits and inspections. Health officials are informing the businesses to cease operation until they qualify for and obtain a food-catering permit.

Catering businesses operating without a permit will be required to respond within 15 days of receipt of the notice to avoid further legal action. Illegally operating a food-catering establishment is a Class III Misdemeanor and is punishable by fines of as much as \$2,000.00 and/or 30 days in jail per occurrence.

"Environmental health inspectors are finding a number of individuals operating out of unapproved establishments like homes, apartments, unapproved church kitchens and flower shops," said David Ludwig, Maricopa County Environmental Health Manager. "The list keeps growing. We are using an automated permit recovery system to identify the caterers and then contact the businesses to verify operation."

"Maricopa County has the responsibility to minimize food-borne illness in the county by educating businesses and consumers on safe food practices," said Al Brown, Maricopa County Environmental Services Director. "We are taking this opportunity to notify businesses so we can decrease the potential for food-borne illness."

More than 1000 people were reported ill from food-borne illness since January 1, 1999, in Maricopa County. The actual number of people ill is estimated to be higher. Food-borne outbreaks that were related to food-catering activities this year have occurred in Tempe, Phoenix and Peoria.

To further prevent the spread of disease, Maricopa County will use a \$13,090.00 U.S. Food and Drug Administration grant to enhance food safety in the county's catering operation inspection program. Maricopa County is one of 11 recipients to be awarded for innovative food safety projects nationwide.

Off-site food service presents a greater risk of causing food-borne illness than regular restaurant facilities. Larger amounts of food are prepared in advance, then transported, which can lead to a greater chance of time and temperature abuse.

Ludwig said, "We are hoping that these initiatives will reduce the incidence of food-borne disease outbreaks. We are not here to put anyone out of business, but to help them come into compliance and make sure they meet the required environmental health code regulations that have been set to protect the public's health."

Food caterers can call Environmental Lead Specialist Wayne McNulty, Jr., R.S., at (602) 506-6972/6964 to obtain information on qualifying for a permit. If someone is planning an event and wants to check if their caterer has the proper permit, they can look up their official license name on the county's web site at <http://envquery.maricopa.gov/>.